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HISTORY

OF THE

ANCIENT

WORLD

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# A History of Byzantium

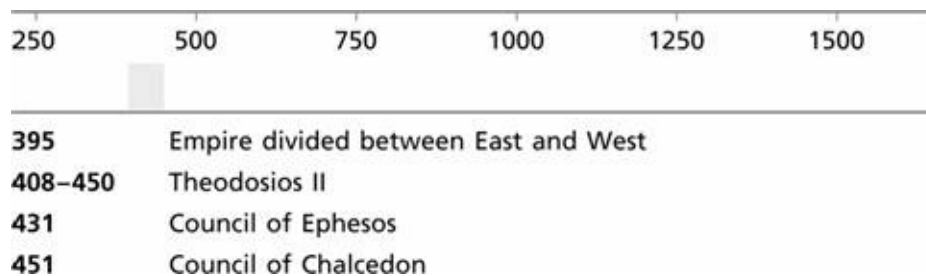
Second Edition

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## *The Fifth Century*



### **The House of Theodosios in the East**

Theodosios I was the last ruler of an undivided Roman Empire. He held the vast extent of the Roman state tightly in his grasp, largely as a result of the strength of his own character and of his experience and determination as a military commander. It is one of the ironies of history, therefore, that the arrangements he left for the administration of the state resulted in what turned out to be its permanent division into two halves, which have (at least to some extent) marked the division of Europe up to the present time. In addition, although Theodosios and his father were military men, raised in the Roman tradition of battle, his successors were all brought up in the palace, and nearly two centuries were to pass before emperors again commonly took the field in person.

As mentioned above, Theodosios had crowned his two sons, Arkadios and Honorius, well before his death and he left no doubt that they were to succeed him on the throne. Arkadios (born 377/8) was, however, only 17 years old when his father died, while Honorius was just 11. Theodosios had already made provision for his sons to be under the tutelage of stronger individuals, the praetorian prefect Rufinos in the case of Arkadios and the patrician Stilicho (whose father was a Vandal) in the case of Honorius. The youth of the two

emperors and the intrigues of the individuals behind the throne led to difficulties, especially when coupled with the revolt of Alaric the Visigoth shortly after Theodosios' death.

As will be recalled, Theodosios I had settled the Visigoths in Roman territory just to the north and west of Constantinople, where they lived essentially under the jurisdiction of their own leaders. Partly as a result of continued contact with the Romans, Visigothic society became more complex, and by the 390s the dominant leader was Alaric, who had served as commander of the Visigothic contingent in the struggle against Eugenius. Disappointed that he was not named *magister militum*, Alaric used the opportunity of Theodosios' death to rise in revolt, devastate the areas outside Constantinople, and even threaten the city itself. Rivalry between the eastern and the western courts prevented effective action against Alaric, and he descended into Greece and ravished unprotected cities. On at least two occasions Stilicho's western armies had Alaric at their mercy, but disagreement with the eastern court kept him from acting and he allowed Alaric to escape. Alaric first set himself up as an independent power in the Balkans, and later, in 401, he invaded Italy. These disasters, coupled apparently with the weakness of Arkadios himself, caused changes in the court of Constantinople, with Rufinos being replaced, first by the eunuch Eutropios (396–400), then by Arkadios' wife Eudoxia (400–4), and finally by the praetorian prefect Anthemios (404–8), as the dominant power in Constantinople. Meanwhile, opposition developed against Stilicho in the West, and he was executed in 408. With Rome essentially defenseless, Alaric took the city and sacked it in AD 410.

Stilicho followed the example set by Arbogast, and he was the first of a line of Germanic commanders who dominated the imperial court in the West through the rest of the fifth century. Although they were prevented from becoming emperors by their position as "barbarians," they nonetheless stood as the power behind the throne. It is significant that such a phenomenon did not develop in the East. An important event in this regard was the attempted coup of the general Gainas. Gainas was himself a Goth and had led a contingent in Theodosios' campaign against Eugenius. Apparently favored by the government over Alaric, he eventually became *magister militum* in 399. His power, however, was feared by many in Constantinople and some of the leading politicians organized opposition to him. As a result of this, in 400 Gainas attempted to seize the city by force: he armed his men secretly and sent them into the city on a supposedly peaceful mission. The attempted coup met with violent resistance from the

people of the city, who set upon the Visigoths and eventually massacred a contingent of them. Gainas himself escaped, but he was soon killed by a Hunnic chieftain, and his attempted coup provided a powerful warning that Germanic commanders would have a difficult time seizing ultimate power in the East.

During the reign of Arkadios John Chrysostom served as bishop of Constantinople. John had been raised in Antioch and received an excellent education, but he was attracted by the monasticism of the Syrian desert, and his attitudes were marked by the harshness and asceticism of that environment. He gained a reputation as a powerful public speaker in Antioch and his followers were fanatically devoted to him, frequently breaking into applause at key points in his sermons. John was selected as bishop and brought to Constantinople in 398, where he immediately became involved in the political intrigues of his day, in part because of his uncompromising stand against Arianism and immorality. His open criticisms of the empress Eudoxia led to his condemnation at a church council, but popular outrage resulted in his temporary return, until his enemies forced him into permanent exile in 400.

John was a strong defender of the rights of the see of Constantinople, especially against the claims of the bishop of Alexandria, which had heretofore been the dominant episcopacy in the Roman East. This was an important step in the rise of Constantinople to a position as the first bishopric of the East. John also opposed the tendency of the Alexandrian school of Biblical exegesis to favor allegorical or symbolic interpretations of Scripture. John favored, instead, a straightforward, almost literal interpretation of the texts and, always, an uncompromising morality.

Arkadios died suddenly in 408, at the age of only 29 or 30. He left behind his son Theodosios II, who was only 7 years old, although he had been crowned as emperor when less than a year of age. Partly because of his youth at the time of his accession, but also apparently as a result of his own temperament, Theodosios was dominated by stronger personalities, especially by his older sister Pulcheria and his wife Athenais-Eudokia. At the same time, Theodosios' reign was marked by extraordinary peace on the frontiers and the accompanying lack of influence from military men in the eastern capital: the Persians presented no significant threat from the east and the power of Attila and the Huns was bought off by the offering of rich gifts. The main foreign concern of the eastern court was to restore the unity of the empire, largely through diplomatic attempts to win over the western court, in part through dynastic marriages. These attempts eventually all failed, although the East had important allies in the person of Galla

Placidia and others. At the same time, this period witnessed what turned out to be significant concessions of territories in the West to the barbarians, and the conquest of North Africa by the Vandals.

As mentioned, the court in Constantinople was marked by a certain internal tension, in large part as a result of the emperor's youth at the time of his accession. The transition from the reign of Arkadios was smoothed by the praetorian prefect Anthemios, who remained in power until 414 or 415. Anthemios was a member of one of the most powerful of contemporary aristocratic families, and the church historian Socrates reports that during the emperor's minority he was the virtual ruler of the East. Anthemios maintained a pro-Persian policy that secured peace in the East; he reformed the food

### Box 5.1 Women of the House of Theodosios

In the early 1980s Kenneth Holm published an important book examining the apparent paradox that the women of the Theodosian dynasty, in an age apparently dominated by male figures and military events, played a crucial role in politics. He pointed to their importance in the establishment and continuation of the Theodosian dynasty and their individual abilities and accomplishments as important factors in this regard. After Theodosios I the emperors of the dynasty were not apparently strong personalities, so imperial propaganda pointed to the strength and abilities of the empresses as companions in rule and, of course, as those who bore the children who allowed continuation of the dynasty. An examination of the biographies of these women provides some insight into their abilities and accomplishments.

**Aelia Flaccilla** (d. 385 or 386): wife of Theodosios I, and mother of Arkadios and Honorius. Like Theodosios himself, Flaccilla was a native of Spain and she probably married the future emperor during his temporary retirement there in 376–8, since when she came to Constantinople she had already given birth to two children, Pulcheria (who died as a child) and Arkadios; her second son Honorius was born in 384. Flaccilla died about two years later, and her main accomplishment seems to have been that she prevented Theodosios from compromising with the Arian bishop Eunomios of Kyzikos. Nonetheless, she apparently made a great impression on people during the time she was in Constantinople. Gregory of Nyssa, the famous orator and theologian, wrote a funerary speech in her honor, praising her piety but also the role she played in the suppression of Arianism. He compares the death of the empress to the impact caused by great natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, although her loss was greater because it affected the whole world.

**Eudoxia** (d. 404): Aelia Eudoxia Augusta, daughter of a Roman mother and Bauto, a Frankish general of Valentinian II. She married Arkadios in 396 and bore him five children, including Pulcheria and Theodosios II. She was beautiful and headstrong and she earned the enmity of the fiery archbishop John Chrysostom, who compared her to Jezebel and Salome. Eudoxia succeeded in having Chrysostom exiled twice, but she died after suffering a miscarriage in 404.

**Pulcheria** (399–453): Aelia Pulcheria Augusta was the daughter of Arkadios and Eudoxia and sister of the emperor Theodosios II. When Arkadios died, in 408, Pulcheria was 9 and Theodosios II 7. At the beginning of the reign the praetorian prefect Anthemios was in charge of the regency. In 414

Theodosios crowned the 15-year-old Pulcheria as *augusta* and she dominated the court from that time on. Pulcheria had taken a vow of celibacy and she persuaded her two sisters to do so as well, so that sources report that the court had all the characteristics of a monastery. She supervised the education of her brother and pursued a policy with interests in the West. Theodosios' wife, Eudokia, challenged her authority, as did the patriarch Nestorios, who refused to allow her to enter the altar area of the Great Church of Constantinople. Pulcheria, however, had her revenge at the Council of Ephesos (431) where Nestorios was condemned and deposed. After the return of Eudokia to Constantinople in 439 Pulcheria's power waned; the "Robber Council" of 449 was a defeat for her and she sought support from Pope Leo I. After Theodosios' unexpected death in 450 Pulcheria held power in her own name, but she agreed to marry the aged senator Marcian on condition that he respect her virginity. Pulcheria was influential in the Council of Chalcedon (451) which condemned Monophysitism.

**Athenais-Eudokia** (ca. 400–60): Aelia Eudokia Augusta, daughter of Leontios, a pagan philosopher in Athens, married Theodosios II in 421 and bore him three children, the eldest of whom, Licinia Eudoxia, married Valentinian III. Eudokia was highly educated and a poet of some note; a few of her works survive. She apparently led a faction of religious moderates but these were eclipsed by the power of the empress Pulcheria and Eudokia left Constantinople for the Holy Land in 438. When she returned the next year she regained power but accusations of adultery forced her to return to Jerusalem in 443, where she lived estranged from her husband for the rest of her life. In the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 she initially sided with the Monophysites, but was ultimately reconciled with the Chalcedonians.

**Galla Placidia** (388–450): daughter of Theodosios I, she spent most of her life in the West, where she went with her father in 394. She was captured by the Visigoths at the time of Alaric's sack of Rome in 410 and she married the new king Athaulf in 414. She was, apparently, able to influence the policy of the Visigoths in favor of Rome. After Athaulf's death the next year she was returned to the Romans, and in 417 she married the *patricius* Flavius Constantius, the primary general of Honorius, who was made *augustus* in 421 (as Constantius III). The couple had two children, including Valentinian III, who became emperor in the West. Theodosios II refused to acknowledge Constantius III, hoping to unite the whole of the empire under his rule. Constantius, however, died in 421 and Galla Placidia broke with her brother and was accused of treason. She fled to the court of Theodosios II in 423 and, after Honorius' death in the same year, the eastern court sought to use her to gain control over the West. Theodosios' troops, under Aspar the Alan, defeated the western usurper Ioannes and established Valentinian III on the throne in Ravenna, with Galla Placidia as regent. After ca. 425 the Roman general Aetius was the major power behind the throne, as he used alliances, especially with the Huns, to control the various Germanic peoples in the West. Galla Placidia was a significant patron and stimulated church construction, especially in Ravenna.

### ***FURTHER READING***

R. W. Burgess, "The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 86–7 (1993–4), 47–68.

K. G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*. Berkeley, CA, 1982.

J. M. O'Flynn, *Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire*. Edmonton, 1983.

S. I. Oost, *Galla Placidia Augusta*. Chicago, 1968.

M. D. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia*. Lanham, MD, 1998.

supply of the capital and rebuilt the Land Walls of the city, leaving them in essentially the shape they were to have for the next thousand years. After Anthemios' death power fell to the emperor's sister Pulcheria, who was to play a remarkably dominant role in politics for the next 40 years. By this time (ca. 416) she had already taken a vow of virginity that allowed her a free field of operation, and she devoted herself to her own religious policies and the politics of the imperial court. Along with the bishop of Constantinople, Attikos, she sought to turn the atmosphere of the court into that of a monastery, and she was later credited with requesting that the image of the Virgin supposedly painted by the Evangelist Luke be brought to Constantinople. She personally supervised the education of her brother, the emperor, and she followed a decidedly western policy, ordering the bust of Honorius to be placed in a position of honor in the Senate of Constantinople.

**Figure 5.1** Coin of Theodosios II. This gold coin was struck in 420–1 to commemorate the victory of the emperor's troops (even though he never took the field himself). On the obverse (front) is the emperor in military costume, and on the reverse is a Victory (the old pagan personification of victory, who was iconographically transformed into the image of an angel) holding a long cross and the words VOTCC MVLTXXX, which represent a prayer of thanksgiving for the twentieth anniversary of the emperor's reign and another prayer that the emperor will reign for another ten years. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.

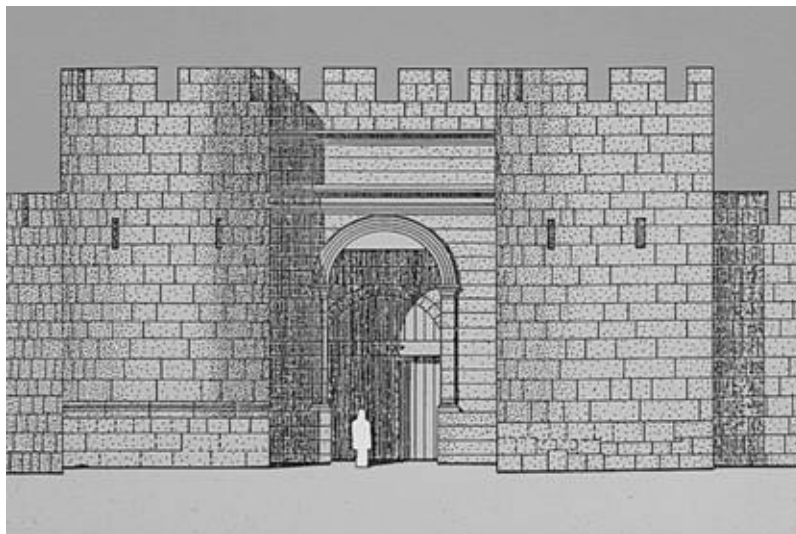


In 421 Theodosios married Athenais, daughter of a pagan philosopher from Athens, who took the name Eudokia after her baptism. She was an attractive and talented woman who wrote poetry of some merit, and she bore the emperor three

children. She gathered around herself a circle of educated and powerful people who sought to emphasize traditional culture and Roman secular values. For a time Eudokia dominated life at court, but Pulcheria maintained her own base of power and slowly began to eclipse the influence of her sister-in-law. Eudokia left Constantinople for the Holy Land, first in 438, and then, finally, in 443, after which Pulcheria was once again a major force at court.

Interestingly, the government of Theodosios II seems to have taken a real interest in the fortification of the cities and the countryside of the empire. As mentioned above, the praetorian prefect Anthemios expanded and rebuilt the walls of Constantinople and there is evidence of similar activity elsewhere, most notably the construction of what was later called the Hexamilion (“six-mile long” wall), a great barrier across the Isthmos of Korinth in Greece, designed to block the raids of barbarians such as Alaric at the very end of the fourth century. The poet Kyros from Egyptian Panopolis, as prefect of the city, also repaired the walls of Constantinople after a disastrous earthquake in 437.

**Figure 5.2** Northeast gate, Byzantine fortress at Isthmia (reconstruction). This was a monumental gateway through the Hexamilion, the 8-kilometer wall across the Isthmus of Korinth, designed to prevent barbarians from entering the Peloponnesos. This fortification was built in the early years of Theodosios II’s reign and rebuilt on several occasions over the next millennium. Reconstruction by Charles Pierce. Courtesy of The Ohio State University Excavations at Isthmia.



Unlike his grandfather and namesake, Theodosios II was not a strong military leader and he never took the field himself. Under his reign relations with the

Persians were relatively peaceful but the Huns were kept at bay only by the payment of huge subsidies. Theodosius sought to intervene in western affairs, both in dynastic struggles within the court and in an attempt to limit the power of the Vandals, who had established themselves in North Africa from 429 onward. These latter attempts, however, only led to dismal failure.

Theodosios' reign, however, was marked by the creation of the *Codex Theodosianus* (or Theodosian Code), the first complete summary of Roman law, issued in 438. The code contained imperial enactments from the time of Constantine I up to Theodosios himself, and it was both a remarkable achievement of legal organization and a rich source of information for modern historians about the fourth and early fifth centuries.

## **The Christological Controversy**

During the reign of Theodosios II some of the most important developments in church politics and doctrine played themselves out. In the fourth century the major theological issue was the Arian controversy, which essentially involved the relationship among the members of the Christian Trinity: the main question was whether the Son (Christ) was fully equal to the Father, that is, whether the Son was “of the same substance” (*homoousios*) with the Father, or whether he was in some way “less fully God” than the Father. As mentioned above, the Council of Nicaea decided to accept the teaching that Christ and the Father were both fully God, and this was confirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

These decisions, however, which were largely concerned with so-called Trinitarian questions (i.e., those concerning relations among the three members of the Trinity), left unanswered equally difficult issues concerning the person of Christ, which are normally called Christological questions. To put the matter very simply, if Christ was fully God (as Nicaea had said) how could he be fully a human being? And if he were not fully a human being, how could his death and sacrifice on the cross be effective in the salvation of mankind? In this regard, the decision of Nicaea seemed to some people to favor a strict kind of monotheism in which the human element was downplayed, and this resurrected older controversies about how God himself should be viewed and how humans were to understand their relationship to him. Naturally, these were difficult questions, and, as in the Arian controversy of the fourth century, they were approached by intellectuals and theologians using the traditions and terminology of Greek philosophy. As we have said before, this philosophical tradition was ideally

suited for such a task, although the differing tendencies of the theological schools increased the likelihood of serious disagreement or splits within the church which, given the prevailing view since the time of Constantine and Eusebios, would have serious ramifications for the empire as a whole. The emperor was certain to be involved since he generally believed that the success of his reign depended on the support of God, which (in turn) would largely depend on the emperor's support of correct theological positions and the suppression of heresy.

As one can imagine, the Christological controversy was enormously complex and it involved concepts and distinctions that are not only difficult for us to understand fully but difficult to express accurately without recourse to the technical terminology of Greek philosophy. At the same time, the issues involved touched people directly since they concerned the identity of God and the traditions through which many people in the empire had come to look at the world and their place in it. By the time the controversy broke out many people already had firm ideas about how they envisioned their God, and these ideas were not always easy to change.

As already mentioned, it is common to speak of two different "schools" of theology, that of Alexandria and that of Antioch. Such a distinction is an oversimplification, but it may be helpful to look at the way in which these affected the Christological controversies. The Alexandrian tradition, mentioned above, was based on the ideas of Neoplatonism, as they had been adapted to Christianity in the third century by Origen and Clement of Alexandria. Among the principles of Alexandrian teaching was an allegorical (rather than a literal) interpretation of the Bible (especially the Old Testament) and a strong emphasis on the divinity (as opposed to the humanity) of Christ. The Antiochian School developed in opposition to the ideas of the Alexandrian School, and it emphasized a historical or even literal interpretation of the Bible and the humanity of Christ (while not denying his divinity); the Antiochene tradition therefore stressed the two natures of Christ (human and divine).

Not surprisingly, given the importance of religion in this age, the Christological controversy had significant political ramifications. As would be expected, the emperors understood that they had a responsibility to become involved, since they had been entrusted by God with the protection of the church and its doctrines, and they all seem to have accepted the idea that their own political and military successes were directly related to (indeed largely determined by) their maintenance of correct religious doctrine. In addition, as we

have already seen, the important bishops of the period were involved in struggles for power among themselves, something that was of considerable importance, given the increasing political and economic influence that the bishops could wield. The bishop of Rome (the pope) was generally regarded in the fourth and fifth centuries as the most prestigious of the bishops of the empire, in part because Rome was the ancient capital of the empire and in part because of the New Testament story of how Christ had singled out Peter (traditionally the first bishop of Rome) as the “rock” on which the church would be built. In addition, the bishop of Rome had no serious rival in the West (with the possible exception of the bishop of Milan), whereas there were many powerful bishops in the East. There, the bishop of Jerusalem had considerable prestige but little political power, while the chief rivalry was between the large and powerful city of Alexandria and the new (and expanding) imperial capital of Constantinople. The Christological controversy was fought out against the background of the struggle among these ecclesiastical powers.

## **The Nestorian controversy: the Council of Ephesos (431)**

In 428 Theodosios II selected Nestorios as bishop of Constantinople. The new bishop was from the same milieu as John Chrysostom and he was, like his famous predecessor, an ascetic with a reputation as a powerful orator and an outspoken opponent of heresy. From the outset Nestorios earned enemies in Constantinople, in part by his condemnation of games and theaters and his attacks on the Arians; he also earned the enmity of the empress Pulcheria. In 429 Nestorios delivered a famous sermon in which he objected to the use of the term Theotokos (literally the “God-bearer,” or Mother of God) for the Virgin Mary. Nestorios’ own ideas are not very well known, because we hear about them mainly from his enemies, but in general he objected to the idea that God himself could be born as a human being; rather, he preferred to use the term Christotokos (the Mother of Christ) for the Virgin. Opposition to Nestorios immediately emerged, led by Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, and to a certain degree the controversy can be seen as a struggle between the theological schools of Antioch and Alexandria. Nestorios’ enemies argued that the bishop taught that there were two Christs, one who was fully God and one who was also human, and the most serious charge against him was that he separated these two aspects of Christ more than his opponents thought was appropriate. Thus, the two sides were not

as far apart as some modern observers might imagine. Both agreed that Christ was both human and divine, but they disagreed about the way in which these two aspects were joined.

The emperor strongly supported his bishop, but he finally agreed to have the issue debated by an ecumenical council at Ephesos (in western Asia Minor) in 431. The council was, from the beginning, essentially under the control of Cyril of Alexandria, and Nestorios was soon condemned and sent into exile. Theodosios II was not at all pleased with this outcome, but in the end he came to accept it. Nestorios had, however, gained many supporters who refused to agree to the condemnation of their leader and who supported his view of the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ. They felt that the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (see below) justified their position, and they eventually established their own church organization and their own hierarchy. Most of the adherents of Nestorianism were in Syria, and, since they were persecuted for their belief within the Byzantine Empire, many of them migrated to Persia, Arabia, and even farther east, to Central Asia, India, and even China, where they have maintained churches up to the present.

## **Monophysitism and the Council of Chalcedon (451)**

Thus, the Council of Ephesos was a victory for Alexandrian theology and, just as much, for the bishop of Alexandria. Nonetheless, some theologians in Constantinople feared a revival of Nestorianism in the late 440s, and they pressed their ideas perhaps further than they meant to do. The leader of this movement was the monk, Eutyches, who taught that Christ had only one nature (*physis*) – and this was divine. He was opposed by Flavian, the bishop of Constantinople, but supported by Dioskoros, the bishop of Alexandria. This controversy was to be settled at the second Council of Ephesos (449, often called the “Robber Council” because it ended in considerable violence). Dioskoros and his followers did not hesitate to intimidate the delegates to the council, and they therefore exonerated Eutyches and condemned and deposed Flavian, who died soon thereafter as a result of this treatment.

In 450, however, Theodosios II died suddenly in a hunting accident. No preparations had been made for the succession, and power naturally fell to Pulcheria, who had been *augusta* from 414 and who had many supporters at court, especially those who disagreed with the policies recently advocated by her brother. Pulcheria’s supporters, however, felt that she could not rule the empire

in her own name, so she was married to Marcian, an aged military officer, who had risen to power as an associate of Aspar the Alan, a powerful barbarian commander who dominated the army in the latter years of Theodosios II. A condition of the marriage was that Marcian respect the empress' virginity. Pulcheria had already been in contact with Pope Leo I about the decisions of the Robber Council, which she regarded as unacceptable. The pope and the new emperor Marcian agreed with Pulcheria and a new council was called to investigate the issue again. It was held in October of 451 at Chalcedon, a suburb of Constantinople on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphoros.

From the outset it was clear that the new council would reverse the decisions of the Robber Council, and many of the bishops hastened to claim that they had been coerced by the violence of the Egyptians and their supporters at Ephesos in 449. Pope Leo did not attend the meeting himself, but sent his legates, who carried with them a statement of faith usually described as the "Tome of Leo," and this was accepted by the council as a proper understanding of orthodox Christianity. The council therefore proclaimed that Christ had two natures (*physeis*), human and divine, and that these were inviolably joined together without division or separation. Its acceptance of the two natures of Christ was thought by some to have gone back to the teachings of Nestorios (and Nestorios himself – who was still alive – claimed that this was the case). At the same time, the council did not really solve the dilemma, since virtually all participants in the debate had agreed that there were two natures in Christ. The disagreement centered rather on the characterization of the way in which the human and the divine natures were joined. In any case, by condemning Eutyches and Dioskoros the council made it certain that large portions of the church of Egypt would refuse to accept its teaching.

From this time we can date a significant split in the Christian church. It is true that schisms had existed before. The Arians had never accepted the Council of Nicaea, but they were marginalized after 381. The Nestorians refused to accept the Council of Ephesos, but they came to live essentially outside the empire. The Monophysites, however – as the opponents of Chalcedon came to be called – lived in some of the most populous and most important parts of the empire, in Egypt and (increasingly) in Syria. Much of the religious history of the next 200 years (and perhaps even beyond) can be seen as a struggle to find a solution, or a compromise, to problems resulting from the decisions made at Chalcedon in 451.

Not incidentally, the council also elevated the position of the bishop of

Constantinople by granting him control over Thrace and much of Asia Minor, while ranking the patriarch of Constantinople second in prestige only to the bishop of Rome: this was certainly a direct affront to the bishop of Alexandria, and it confirmed the position of the bishop of the capital as the most important church dignitary in the East. Additionally, in part as a result of the violent activity of some of the monks, the council declared that all monasteries should be under the supervision of their bishop.

After the council the emperor sought to impose a Chalcedonian (i.e., “dyophysite”) bishop in Alexandria, but the Egyptians – including most of the bishops themselves – refused to cooperate, and a new bishop could be imposed only by the force of imperial arms. Opposition was strong in Alexandria, but it was perhaps even greater in the villages and monasteries of the country; despite the dominance of Greek in the cities, country people had continued to speak the Egyptian language, which was written in an alphabet based on Greek and is known to us as Coptic. For this reason, historians usually refer to the Monophysite Christians of Egypt as Copts, since their liturgy and theological literature was increasingly written in the Coptic language. Similarly, the Monophysites of Syria are commonly referred to as Jacobites, after their leader Jacob Baradaeus (d. 578), and they increasingly used the local language, Syriac, in their literature and church services. As a result of these divisions, from the time of Chalcedon onward, many of the great cities of the eastern part of the empire had two bishops, one loyal to the emperor and the teachings of the council, and one Monophysite.

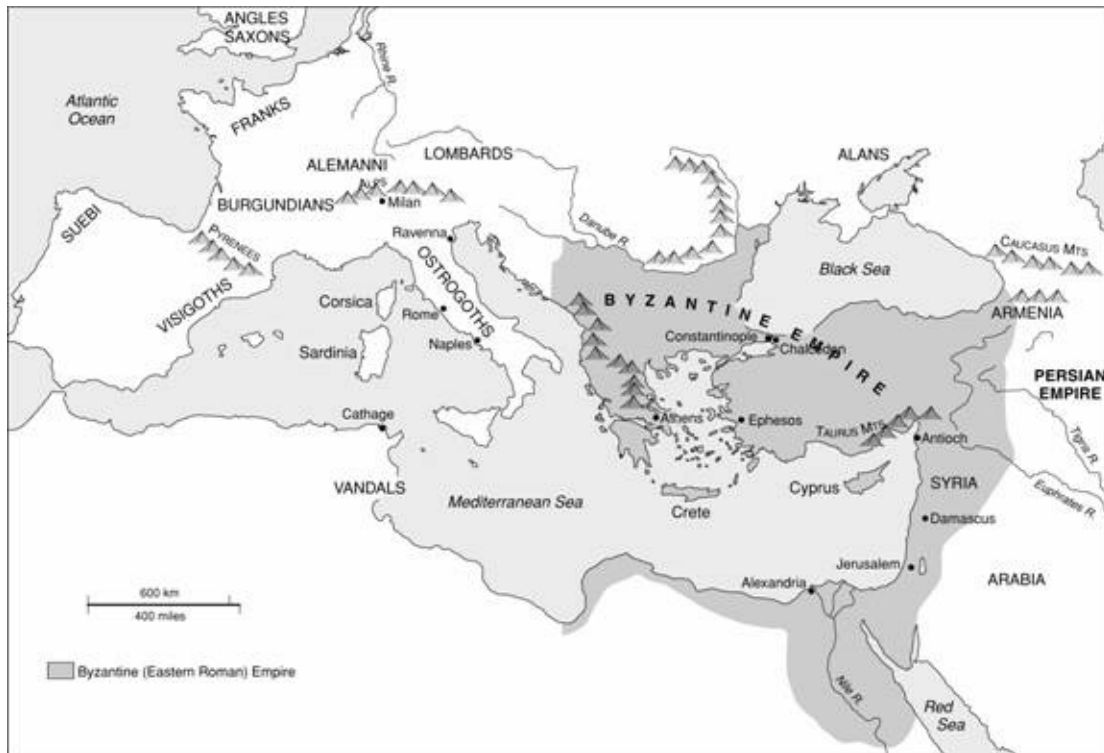
At one time historians sought to explain the divisions and strong feelings by reference to “national” sentiments on the part of the “oppressed” subjects of the empire. Such a view is no longer tenable, in part because concepts such as nationalism were unknown to people of the pre-modern age, but there is still reason to see in Monophysitism and similar movements an emphasis on local, as opposed to empire-wide concerns, and to see the revival of local languages and culture as a primary characteristic of the period. Thus, instead of viewing the fifth and sixth centuries as a period of cultural uniformity, we should see it as one of vibrant and quite remarkable diversity: the emperor and many churchmen (whose views have come down to us) may have wished to impose unity on the culture of the period, but the reality was quite clearly very different.

## **Marcian and the Emperors of the Fifth**

## Century

Marcian (450–7), as we have seen, came to power as a result of the sudden death of Theodosios II and the need for Pulcheria to find a male colleague. In addition, Marcian had been associated with Aspar the Alan, a general who operated in both the East and West and who came to play a leading role in Constantinople itself. Nonetheless, Marcian was not just a cipher emperor and his policies went far beyond the issue of religious doctrine. In this regard, he seems to have been in tune with other members of the senatorial class of the East, who did not agree with all the policies of Theodosios II. Marcian was a soldier who had risen from the ranks to attain high office, but he had come to agree with most of the ideas of the senatorial aristocracy. Thus, he abolished the *collatio glebalis*, one of the taxes on land, and reduced some of the payments made by officials at the time of their accession. Theodosios' payment of tribute to Attila and the Huns had galled many senators, and immediately upon his accession Marcian refused to continue the practice. Rather surprisingly, Attila hesitated to attack Constantinople, but instead moved westward, where he was to wreak considerable havoc. One might have expected Marcian to have adopted a more pro-western political stance, but he failed to support the western court in its struggle with the Vandals. Nonetheless, Marcian's reign was a success and he left the treasury full at the time of his death. Pulcheria had predeceased her husband, and in 457 the dynasty of Theodosios I came to an end.

**Map 5.1** Europe and western Asia in the fifth century, after AD 476 (after Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 5th edn (Belmont, CA, 2003), map 7.4, p. 181)



By 457 Aspar the Alan was the leading power in Constantinople. Although he was himself not of Germanic origin, he came to represent the interests of the Germanic soldiery and was as close as anything Byzantium was to know to a generalissimo of the type that had become common in the fifth-century West. At the time of Marcian's death Aspar was able to secure the choice of Leo I (457–74) as emperor, and he was crowned by the patriarch Anatolios, the first time this practice is recorded. Leo was, like his predecessor, a soldier who rose through the ranks and ended up as one of Aspar's personal assistants. Aspar, whose Arianism prevented him from seizing the throne in his own name, sought to use Leo as a compliant tool of his own policy, and there is little doubt that Aspar was the power behind the throne during Leo's early years, leading a successful campaign against the Huns and intervening, with dubious success, in the affairs of the West. Aspar's plan of a naval campaign against the Vandals in 468 failed, due to the incompetence of the commander, Basilikos, who was the brother of Leo's wife Verina. Toward the end of his reign Leo was more successful in the West. In 467 he named Anthemios, son-in-law of Marcian, as caesar and sent him to Italy, where he was accepted as emperor and viewed by some as the hope for unity between East and West. After Anthemios was overthrown and killed by the western general Ricimer in 472, Leo seems to have encouraged Julius Nepos to seize the western throne.

Leo was, in the end, a match for Aspar's cunning, and he was able to use the Isaurians as a military balance to Aspar's Germanic troops. The Isaurians were a tribal people who lived in southeastern Asia Minor and who gained a significant reputation as skilled and fearless fighters; by the fifth century they made up a significant part of the eastern army. One of the Isaurian commanders, whose original name was Tarasis but who took the name Zeno, offered his support to Leo. The emperor arranged for Zeno to marry his daughter Ariadne, and he used Zeno to free himself of Aspar's control; in 471 both Aspar and his son Ardabourios were found murdered.

Leo I had no sons, so he looked to his grandson, also named Leo (Leo II, emperor 473–4), to succeed him. Leo II was the son of Ariadne and Zeno; although only 6 years of age, he was crowned as emperor by Leo I just before his death. Then, after Leo I's death in early 474, the young emperor crowned his father Zeno as emperor (474–91) and shortly thereafter died himself. There was some talk that Zeno had killed his son, and the dowager empress Verina formed a plot against Zeno, leading to the acclamation of her brother Basilikos as emperor. The movement against Zeno was directed in part against the role that the Isaurian soldiers had come to play in Constantinople, but Basilikos gave it a religious dimension as he openly promoted Monophysitism. Zeno fled to Isauria in 475 but was able to return to Constantinople, in part with the help of Theodoric the Ostrogoth, who had become the most powerful of the Germanic commanders in the East.

The reign of Zeno witnessed a number of important events in the West, in which the eastern court played little role. Zeno accepted Julius Nepos as western emperor, but was not willing to do anything to help him when he was overthrown, fearing Nepos' connection with the dowager empress Verina. Zeno, however, certainly never recognized the "last" western emperor Romulus Augustulus, and continued to regard Nepos as his colleague until the latter's death in 480. The Ostrogoths continued to cause problems in Thrace, and in 488 Zeno persuaded Theodoric to march on Italy in order to remove Odoacer, who ruled the West in fact, if not in name. The movement of the Ostrogoths to Italy and the establishment of Theodoric in Ravenna were events of considerable importance, in large part because, even though he was a Goth and an Arian, Theodoric had grown up in Constantinople, and he was fully aware of Byzantine ways and the ideals of Byzantine civilization. Although he never had himself proclaimed as emperor, he very much acted the part, arguably the first Germanic ruler to do so. He actively supported the Roman aristocrats Boethius and

Cassiodorus, both of whom held official posts in his government and who were influential in the transmission of Roman culture to the Goths. Theodoric acted the part of an imperial patron, and he graced his capital of Ravenna with a number of impressive buildings, including a palace (now destroyed), the church of San Apollinare Nuovo, the Arian baptistery, and his own mausoleum.

Although he was probably himself a moderate Monophysite, Zeno had no real interest in religion. He regarded the split within the church, however, as damaging to the state in many ways, and he worked with the patriarch of Constantinople, Akakios, to end the schism. The *Henotikon* (declaration of unity) was a document, issued in 482, that sought to end the controversy by compromise and by imperial fiat. It ignored the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon and made no mention of the dispute concerning the natures of Christ. It condemned both Nestorios and Eutyches and required that the decisions of the first three ecumenical councils (i.e., before Chalcedon) be regarded as binding. Not surprisingly, the *Henotikon* pleased neither side, since nobody was willing to compromise, and it led only to the creation of yet a third party, the adherents of the patriarch Akakios and those who accepted the imperial edict, who were, in turn, condemned thoroughly by the other two groups. The papacy was of course completely opposed to the *Henotikon* and this led to a formal break between the two churches, usually called the Akakian (or Acacian) Schism, after the name of the patriarch Akakios. The *Henotikon* remained officially in force until 519, but it was not, indeed could not be, enforced. It was, however, a rare example of an attempt by an emperor to impose religious doctrine by imperial decree.

## **Anastasios I (491–519)**

The emperor Zeno died in 491, and power was for the time being in the hands of his widow Ariadne. Going against the wishes of Zeno himself, Ariadne chose as emperor a relatively undistinguished military officer of dubious ancestry named Anastasios. Anastasios was a dedicated and relatively successful emperor whose long reign brought stability and prosperity to the empire and unquestionably paved the way for the “golden age” of Justinian to follow.

Upon his accession Anastasios immediately set himself the task of placing the Isaurian troops in Constantinople under close imperial control. He was a careful and frugal administrator with a real eye for the details of state finance. He sought to rebuild the cities of the empire in part through the encouragement of trade. He did away with the *chrysargyron*, a tax that fell heavily on commercial interests

and, in 494, he reformed imperial bronze coinage, replacing the nearly worthless small *nummi* with a large coin 40 times their nominal value. This reform was designed, in part at least, to stabilize the bronze coinage on which small-scale commerce depended. Anastasios also removed the burden of collecting taxes from the local *curiales*, placing it instead in the hands of state-appointed *vindices*. Anastasios was an energetic builder and was especially involved in the construction of frontier defenses and churches in various parts of the empire. Despite the expenses associated with these, the emperor's sound financial policies brought their reward, and at his death the treasury is said to have contained 320,000 pounds of gold.

**Figure 5.3** Coin of Anastasios I. The emperor issued this large copper coin as part of his policy to improve the Byzantine economy and the condition of merchants and others who relied on small change to make everyday transactions. The emperor is shown on the obverse in civilian dress and the large K on the reverse is the Greek number 20, indicating that this was a half-follis. A follis was worth 40 of the old small coins that it replaced. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC (DOC I, 23a.2).



Anastasios seems to have been personally religious and a convinced Monophysite; before his elevation to the throne it was even suggested he might be named Monophysite bishop of Antioch. Throughout his reign he left the *Henotikon* as official state policy, and he made several attempts to nominate Monophysite bishops in important cities. This meant that he had strained relations with the papacy and the West in general; the papacy demanded that all eastern bishops accept the teachings of Chalcedon without reservation, and proposed discussions between the parties were unsuccessful. Anastasios' attempt to impose a Monophysite bishop on Constantinople in 511 led to the revolt of Vitalian in Thrace. Vitalian appears not to have wanted to overthrow Anastasios, but to force him to accept Chalcedon; the rebel, however, was defeated in 515

and the revolt collapsed. Anasatasios was also hostile to Theodoric and the Ostrogoths in Italy; although he recognized Theodoric as king of Italy in 497, disagreements later broke out over Pannonia. The long peace that had characterized the East since the days of Theodosios I was broken in 502 in a war with Persia; although they initially suffered setbacks, the troops of Anastasios ultimately prevailed and peace was signed in 506. Anastasios used the respite to rebuild many of the fortifications in the East, most notably at the frontier city of Dara. The Bulgars, a Turkic people who had moved west from Central Asia in the train of the Huns, overran the Danube frontier, beginning as early as 493, and this led the emperor to construct the Long Walls in Thrace. This was a barrier wall across the whole Thracian peninsula, which placed the first line of defense of Constantinople some distance from the capital. He probably also fortified a number of other cities whose defenses are normally attributed to Justinian.

## **Religion and Society in the Fifth Century**

Byzantine society changed in significant ways during the fifth century. These changes were not so sudden or dramatic as those of the fourth century, which can be seen as real changes in direction. Rather, the phenomena of the fifth century can best be thought of as developments built on the basic system established in the preceding period. They were, nonetheless, important, for they created the forms and systems that were to remain for the rest of the Byzantine Empire and beyond.

### **The construction of Christian space**

By the fifth century, society in the Byzantine Empire had become largely Christian in orientation, although the majority of the population was perhaps still not officially Christian. We can see, in this period, the continued growth of episcopal power, not only from the written sources, but also from the archaeological evidence, characterized by the construction of huge ecclesiastical complexes. These featured not only churches for the worship of the faithful, but also large and lavish living accommodations for the bishop and his staff, and many other rooms and buildings to house the administrative and welfare needs of the church. Since a hallmark of the Christian church in the period was the charity it offered to the poor, the sick, orphans, and widows, storage facilities for grain and other supplies had to be constructed, and these were often built right

next to the church itself, as orphanages, hospitals, and even monasteries were sometimes. The churches normally also included plentiful supplies of fresh water and a large enclosed space to the west of the church, called an atrium, where crowds could gather for a variety of purposes. The architecture of the churches, as we have seen, was based largely on the traditions of classical architecture, and the new ecclesiastical complexes became centers of everyday activity that rivaled the old *agora* which had been the center of the classical city.

The churches were not simply utilitarian places for worship or for the provision of social assistance. They were also splendid testimony to the triumph of Christianity and the power of the bishops. Members of the aristocracy and the episcopacy (who were often the same people) competed among themselves in the construction of beautiful buildings, replete with lavish decoration inside and out. As we have said, the churches were often the center of large complexes and their height would frequently make them the most conspicuous structures in the city. Entrances to the church complex were often marked with decorated archways opening onto courtyards with fountains, sculpture, and colonnaded porches.

The inside of the churches enclosed enormous open spaces. Building on the techniques developed in Roman basilicas and baths, the architects of these churches clearly meant to dazzle the eye of the beholder with the height and the width of the enclosed space. Columns were frequently used to support the walls and roof, and these too were arranged in ways that emphasized the majesty of the interior of the building.

Throughout the empire thousands of these churches were built in the fourth to the seventh centuries and even the most remote rural building often displayed remarkable richness of decoration. The floors were normally paved with slabs of stone – commonly marble, limestone, or slate – or with mosaic. The latter provided opportunities for a wide variety of decoration, with both abstract and figural decorations used. Interestingly, the mosaic decorations in churches seem to resemble very closely those found in public secular buildings and private villas of the time, and it is clear that scenes from nature and representations of hunting, animal fights, and pagan mythology were considered appropriate for the decoration of the floors of churches. Undoubtedly this is in part because these were the scenes that aristocratic donors liked, but they are also the result of the patterns that the artisans in the mosaic workshops were accustomed to make.

The interior walls of the churches were covered with highly polished multicolored sheets of marble (called revetment) that would have reflected light

like a mirror and made the interiors of the buildings look even larger than they were. Alternatively, areas of the walls might be covered with mosaics, usually made with brightly colored stone and even glass and depicting scenes from the Bible, saints from the early church, or even Christ himself. Large-scale programs were frequently designed in which the mosaics represented theological ideas and/or reflected the liturgical ceremonies that went on in the interior of the building. Thus, for example, it is clear that processions, involving the clergy and sometimes even ordinary believers, were an especially important part of the services of the church at this time, and processions (often a “heavenly” procession) were frequently depicted on the walls of the buildings.

The interior of churches of the fifth and sixth centuries emphasized both their longitudinal and their vertical elements. Thus, worshipers in many churches (especially those modeled on the basilican plan) would be encouraged to look along the colonnades toward the apse and altar at the eastern end, often far off in the distance. This would indicate to the believer both the distance between God and man, but also, at the same time, the possibility of communication with and ultimately access to the divine. Likewise, most churches of this period emphasized their height, with soaring timber-built roofs and/or masonry vaults and domes. Huge windows with translucent glass let in significant quantities of light that illuminated the otherwise dark interiors of the buildings and reflected, in ever changing patterns, off the variegated surfaces of the floors and walls, many of which would have reflected back and thus magnified the light visible to the worshiper.

In this period churches were not the only public buildings affected by the Christianization of the empire. Christian monuments or monuments with Christian symbols were erected throughout the cities and, of course, churches, monasteries, crosses, and other monuments began to dot the countryside. Wealthy donors in many cities erected columns, fountains, and other monuments that expressed their Christian sentiments. An example of this was the so-called Tetrapylon in Ephesos. This was a group of four columns erected astride one of the main streets of the city, through which all traffic would pass from the city center to the port. On the top of the columns were placed symbols or statues of the four Evangelists, powerfully symbolizing the Christianization of the city and its secular activity. Christian graffiti, including crosses, the Christogram, various letters referring to Christ, etc., are found on the walls, columns, and even streets of all the cities of the age.

## **The organized church**

In this period bishops took the general lead in converting people to Christianity, in part through their charity and through the lavish display of architectural space in the huge urban churches. Virtually all the emperors made donations to the churches and these gifts were commonly transformed immediately into church construction and decoration, into the gold and silver vessels used in the liturgy, and into the elaborate and colorful costumes worn by the numerous clergy. Public processions through the streets of the cities became commonplace, and the music, light, movement, and smells associated with them were certainly attractive to urban dwellers in a way that we – who are bombarded with sights, sounds, and colors – might find difficult to appreciate. The festivals of the church year, which at this time began to emerge in a regular fashion, allowed people to mark time in sequence with the calendar of the church, adding to the attractiveness of Christianity and cementing people's attachment to it.

As we have seen, the church hierarchy, which was rudimentary at the time of Constantine, developed and crystallized in the succeeding years. By the end of the fifth century the bishop had come to control all the property and wealth of his see and he was one of the leading citizens of his city, if not the most important. On some occasions bishops were selected from among the monks of the desert, but many such bishops encountered difficulty or even opposition in their cities, undoubtedly in part because of their lack of experience in dealing with imperial and local officials and the responsibilities of power.

Not surprisingly, already in this period the bishops began to play a role beyond their religious charge. The bishops naturally had to organize a kind of ecclesiastical court to decide matters of church practice and belief and, as we have seen, Constantine incorporated the episcopal court into Roman legal practice. In the years after Constantine this practice was restricted to cases where both parties agreed to the arbitration of the bishop. Nonetheless, as time went on it was natural for individuals to bring their disputes to the bishop and by the early sixth century the decision of an episcopal court was again recognized as having the force of law.

On the one hand, given the importance of Christianity, which was generally represented by the organized church in this period, it is easy to understand the influence of the bishop beyond his religious authority. On the other hand, the fact that the bishop was, from an early date, expected to be unmarried or separated from his wife meant that he would commonly not have children and therefore

might be expected to avoid temptations to look out for his own welfare or that of his family.

As we have also seen, the growing organization of the church meant that the bishops of the greater cities of the empire (the metropolitans) came to exercise administrative and doctrinal authority over the lesser bishops in their province. This organization provided a certain degree of stability and order within the church, and it set down rules for the selection of new bishops, the investigation of complaints, and the removal of bishops who might have failed in their duties. At the same time, the growth in the power of the metropolitans meant that they frequently came into conflict with each other and, as we have seen, this period is marked by heated struggles among the competing interests of the higher churchmen of the empire.

## **The holy man and holy woman**

A key in this period was the emergence of the ascetic, or the “holy man” or “holy woman,” as a central figure in Byzantine society. The phenomenon of the holy person did not simply refer to an individual who lived a holy life: rather, such a person was thought to have the power to effect a direct contact with God and, by this means, to assist in the salvation of others or, more commonly, to work miracles, especially in healing the sick. This concept had deep roots in the religious tradition of the ancient world; it was present in a non-Christian context during the Roman Empire, especially in the form of the theurgist, who claimed to be able to command the divine forces of the universe through his/her own knowledge and special power. Theurgy frequently verged on what we may call superstition or even “quackery,” and many of its practitioners were certainly far from honest.

**Figure 5.4** Funeral stele of an abbot. This stone slab was used to cover a tomb, presumably of an Egyptian abbot. The abbot is shown fully frontal, in a simplified, almost two-dimensional, manner, with his hands raised in the act of prayer. Limestone, Saqqara, sixth–seventh century. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC (DOC I, 23a.2).



What marked the holy man (and holy woman) in both a Christian and a non-Christian context was the ability to surpass the “norm” and touch the divine, and the proof of this was the ability to perform superhuman acts, which we may for the purpose of simplicity call miracles. Thus, within Christianity the idea of the holy man emerged, in part, from the miracles performed by the disciples of Christ and described in the New Testament. Thus, it is clear that in Christianity the idea of individual sanctity – the idea of the saint – emerged at a very early time, and this was not normally conceived in terms of individuals leading a simple good life, but rather it was expected that the holy person would perform remarkable actions and he or she often became a public person, indeed a kind of celebrity.

In the early years of Christianity it was felt that this special status of sanctity was achieved most commonly through martyrdom, and after the martyr’s death the faithful sought to maintain contact with the holy person through the physical possession of the body, parts of the body, or even scraps of cloth or other possessions that had had intimate contact with the saint. As time went on and the persecutions came to an end, the phenomenon of martyrdom declined, although some individuals found that the doctrinal controversies provided an opportunity (if not the necessity) for opposition to the state that occasionally resulted in martyrdom.

The man or woman who was regarded as “holy” while still alive was thus, in a

sense, a “living martyr,” an individual whose role was similar to or the same as that of a saint who had already died. Thus devotion to the holy man (or holy woman) was parallel to the cult of the saints or that of the martyrs, except that he or she was a living individual who could interact with others in the social and political milieu of his or her day. Much has been made of this phenomenon by Peter Brown and his school, and they have made a significant contribution to this period by taking what was once seen as simply a strange, if not perverse, characteristic of the age and placing it within the context of its broader cultural and social setting. Brown was able to argue, for example, that the rise of the holy man was not simply the bizarre product of a superstitious age. Rather, the phenomenon of the holy man/woman was a response to social and political changes in society. Brown started from the proposition that the fourth to sixth centuries were characterized by the decline of the local urban aristocracy (the *curiales*), who had acted as the primary patrons (protectors) of society. As these secular patrons disappeared, the holy man was seen to fill the void and to provide much the same services: local leadership, dispute negotiation, and – most important – a means by which ordinary people could approach the representatives of the imperial power, or even God himself. Thus the holy man was not essentially an odd person who lived in the desert, but rather an individual who, by his/her ascetic practice, had surmounted the normal limitation of the human condition and who had access to God himself: the miracles and even the extreme asceticism were proof of that. In possession of such power, the holy man/woman could provide help to ordinary individuals, whether this was of a practical or a religious nature.

## **Monasticism**

The figure of the holy man/woman impressed itself on many aspects of contemporary society and – since most holy men could be seen as monks – they naturally had a powerful impact on monasticism in a way that (Brown argued) was to provide an important distinction between society in the East and West. During the fifth century monasticism continued to grow as an institution, and many monks left the solitude of their desert retreats and came into the cities of the empire. Some of these were moved by the need to minister to the poor and homeless, and they provided help in a variety of ways. Monasteries became common in cities, especially as wealthy individuals provided fine accommodations for them in unused mansions. Other monks sought to imitate

their ascetic environment in the squalor of the cities, and government authorities developed means to deal with throngs of wandering monks.

Especially interesting was the ability of some bishops to organize groups of fanatically loyal monks in order to intimidate their enemies. Foremost among those who used such tactics were the bishops of Alexandria. The *parabalani*, or “bath attendants,” were semi-clerical workers in hospitals and baths, whose dangerous occupation made them careless of their lives and fanatically devoted to their ecclesiastical leaders.

A particular form of asceticism that developed in the fifth century was the *stylite* movement. *Stylites* were ascetics who sought a special form of solitude by ascending to the top of a column, where they spent months or even years, normally standing alone, exposed to all the elements, and connected to the rest of the world only by a ladder. The first and most influential of these was Symeon the Stylite, a shepherd who practiced extreme forms of asceticism such as living in a dry cistern and chaining his leg to a stone; many of his contemporaries thought he was rather too extreme, and he was expelled from at least one monastery. He then ascended a column at a rural site near Antioch where he remained, and this remarkable feat attracted a considerable following. As people gathered around his column, Symeon sought greater solitude and had the column built higher, until it reached a height of 16 meters from the ground. His reputation spread, and other monks began to imitate him. After his death in 459 a huge pilgrimage complex was built around the column, at a place called Qal’at Sem’an in the north Syrian desert. The column stood in the center of the complex and four basilicas radiated out from it in the shape of a cross; this complex was probably constructed with imperial funds, and it testifies to how a holy man such as Symeon came to be honored. Symeon had many imitators, perhaps the most interesting of whom was Daniel the Stylite, who decided to mount his own column after visiting Symeon in Syria. Daniel, however, moved to the vicinity of Constantinople and, from his column, took part in many of the pressing issues of the day. Thus, his biographer depicts the *stylite* as an adviser of Leo I and an intermediary between the patriarch Akakios and the usurper Basilikos. He even points out Daniel’s

## **Box 5.2 The Murder of the Philosopher Hypatia**

The life of the philosopher Hypatia is a powerful symbol of strikingly divergent tendencies in the early Byzantine world. She was born, ca. 355/60, in the cosmopolitan center of Alexandria, the daughter of the Neoplatonist Theon, who is the last known member of the famous Mouseion of that

city. Like her father, Hypatia was a follower of Ptolemy and was interested especially in mathematics. She was not only an intellectual but also a public figure in Alexandria, mixing her intellect with beauty and political skill that won her considerable popular fame. Characteristically of the age, even though she was a staunch pagan, she was also known for her virtue, which allowed her to withstand the advance of several would-be seducers. Her popularity earned for her the enmity of Cyril of Alexandria, the fiery and sometimes violent patriarch of the city, and in 415 she was set upon by a band of hospital attendants and stabbed to death with quill pens (or, according to the account below, with tiles). Her violent death has often been seen as an important moment in the end of paganism, and modern commentators have viewed her as something of an unwitting martyr to the cause of classical culture. The fact that a woman was one of the last representatives of pagan learning is also to be noted, although her life of virtue bears many similarities to that of Christian holy women.

There was a woman at Alexandria named Hypatia, daughter of the philosopher Theon, who made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time. Having succeeded to the school of Plato and Plotinus, she explained the principles of philosophy to her auditors, many of whom came from a distance to receive her instructions.

On account of the self-possession and ease of manner, which she had acquired in consequence of the cultivation of her mind, she not unfrequently appeared in public in presence of the magistrates. Neither did she feel abashed in coming to an assembly of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more. Yet even she fell a victim to the political jealousy which at that time prevailed. For as she had frequent interviews with Orestes, it was calumniously reported among the Christian populace, that it was she who prevented Orestes from being reconciled to the bishop. Some of them therefore, hurried away by a fierce and bigoted zeal, whose ringleader was a reader named Peter, waylaid her returning home, and dragging her from her carriage, they took her to the church called Caesareum, where they completely stripped her, and then murdered her with tiles. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cynaron, and there burnt them. This affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church. And surely nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort. This happened in the month of March during Lent, in the fourth year of Cyril's episcopate, under the tenth consulate of Honorius, and the sixth of Theodosius. (Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.15, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, trans. under the editorial supervision of Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 2 (New York, 1890; repr. Grand Rapids, MI, 1979–86) )

superiority to the emperor, for on one occasion, when Leo dared to mount his horse in the saint's presence, the horse threw him to the ground. Other ascetics found ways to match the *stylites* in their religious practices, among them the *dendrites*, who performed their religious observances by living in a tree. The ascetic practices of the monks were in accord with the development of apophatic theology, a system of thought that said that God could be known and understood only through personal experience. Toward the end of the fifth century an author identified as Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite wrote a series of works that developed the ideas of Neoplatonism into a system of thought that was generally

in accord with apophatic ideas and that had a wide influence in both East and West.

**Figure 5.5** Qal’at Sem’an. This pilgrimage complex in northern Syria was built around the column of Symeon Stylites the Elder ca. 476–90. Symeon had already died by this time but his fame was such that an unknown donor (possibly the emperor) had a large octagonal church constructed around the column, along with four basilicas radiating out from it. A monastery was constructed in the vicinity and, after the Arab invasions, it was refounded in the tenth century. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.



## FURTHER READING

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